

mentor junior staff and encourage their curiosity and exploration, they do the profession the biggest service they can offer.

One of the greatest challenges designers face right now is to foster this process of mentoring and team learning in the face of the pressures of tight fees and light-speed schedules. Practicing team learning, however, provides part of the solution—effective teams are more efficient and deliver more relevant, more comprehensive, more beneficial outcomes. Firms that have broken the cycle of lower fees and less time for investigation or mentoring have found that they can charge higher fees and enjoy greater profitability because they are working “smarter” and more effectively and at the same time delivering more value to their clients.

SYSTEMS THINKING

In summarizing the five component technologies of team learning, Senge notes that systems thinking integrates the other four, “fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice.” It keeps the other disciplines from being “separate gimmicks” or “the latest . . . fad(s).” Systems thinking “needs the disciplines of building shared vision, mental models, team learning, and personal mastery to realize its potential. Building shared vision fosters a commitment to the long term. Mental models focus on the openness needed to unearth shortcomings in our present ways of seeing the world. Team learning develops the skills of groups of people to look for the larger picture that lies beyond individual perspectives. And personal mastery fosters the personal motivation to continually learn how our actions affect our world. Lastly, systems thinking makes understandable the subtlest aspect of the learning organization—the new way individuals perceive themselves and their world.”² In other words, systems thinking allows us to see the connections between things—to understand the larger context in which people must make choices. It lets us see what any given decision is related to and what it will affect.

Understanding how economic conditions, culture, business intents, personal preferences and beliefs, current and future technologies, and societal trends

may all play a part (and come together) in the development of an interior environment may be the most important ability designers can have. By applying all these learning skills and, in particular, systems thinking, designers can identify and communicate “the value proposition”—the particular assembly of decisions, approaches, and solutions that truly responds to the client’s needs and adds value to their lives or organizations.

THE VALUE OF THE WHOLE PICTURE

Systems thinking implies

Systems thinking implies integration—that we put together the whole picture. “From an early age,” Senge cautions, “we are taught to break apart problems, to fragment the world. This apparently makes complex tasks and subjects more manageable, but we pay a hidden, enormous price. We can no longer see the consequences of our actions; we lose our intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole.” We lose the ability to address and balance all the elements of a given situation, and instead find ourselves optimizing one part and in the process, suboptimizing the whole.²

In many cultures, the traditional role of the “architect as master builder” is still in practice. It provides a single point of responsibility and accountability wherein the designer has a mission to design and provide a solution developed with creativity but delivered to support the goals and objectives of the client. Unfortunately, pressures on fees and the threats of litigation have fostered an attitude in U.S. practices of risk avoidance. This does not excuse the design profession from the requirement to take a holistic approach to solutions—one that embraces the interests of all constitutive parties and beneficiaries.

Taking on the role of “integrator” presents a wonderful opportunity to create value. When done well, one creates results that are greater than the sum of the parts. This role does not presently exist in any formal way in the design industry—but no one else is as well positioned to provide it as the interior design profession. Even our metaphoric jazz band has a leader. The goal of the design profession should be to assume that leader’s role.

If designers do not take on that leadership role, they give away an incredibly valuable opportunity to play the most important role there is—to be the